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HEADLINE: DON'T LIGHT UP NEAR ME!

BYLINE: AD HUDLER

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BODY:

The way Ray Crampton sees it, the world is starting to get a little too uncivil. He tells this story:

Not long ago, the 60-year-old Fort Myers, Fla. man was waiting for a plane in the terminal at Hartsfield International Airport in Atlanta. As idle tobacco-loving travelers do, he lit up a Salem cigarette and settled back in his vinyl chair for a smoke.

Then, believe it or not, Crampton says, a man walked up to him and dropped a verbal bomb.

"I hope you die of cancer of the lung," the man told a startled Crampton.

"Let me tell you," Crampton says, remembering that moment, "There's a fanaticism out there. These people are getting rude."

If you're a smoker, you've probably noticed the attack through headlines and from Dan Rather.

KA-BAM! Today, 43 states limit smoking to some degree in public places - and the rules are getting stronger.

SPLASH! A few months back, a man in Illinois was fined for throwing a cup of coffee on a cigar smoker.

ZONK! Even the normally upbeat Reader's Digest assured smoking men in a recent article that they were more likely than non-smokers to become impotent.

POW! This spring, Congress permanently turned on the no-smoking lights for all commercial airline flights in the continental United States.

A stop-smoking campaign has smoldered for decades. In 1964, the Surgeon General issued his first report on the health hazards of nicotine. Since then, that office has released and preached 20 similar studies.

Why, then, is it just today that we've seen all these radical no-smoking reforms? Why are smokers under siege now? What would prompt a strange man in Atlanta to wish Ray Crampton dead?

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About 25 years ago, 40 percent of adult United States residents smoked.

For decades, tobacco has been as implanted in our culture as soap operas and the automobile. It's even more ingrained in retirement areas, such as Southwest Florida because older people grew up with a Hollywood that made smoking look sexy and macho, says Jennifer Stock of the Smoking Policy Institute in Seattle. Bogart Smoked. Dietrich smoked. Detectives smoked. Advertisements back then even told people smoking would clear their sinuses and calm them down.

"It was socially encouraged," Stock says. "It's very hard for these older people to change. It's part of their lifestyle. They've been doing it for most of their lives."

"What you're doing here (with the anti-smoking campaign) is trying to change culture," says Beverly Rozar, executive director of the American Cancer Society's Southwest Florida office in Fort Myers. "It's just taken this long to change those attitudes."

Five years ago, the percentage of Americans who smoked had dropped to 30 percent. Today, the American Cancer Society estimates it to be anywhere from 26 percent to 29 percent.

The numbers are smaller today, but all those years of smoking have finally caught up with us.

Since the 1960s, the number of deaths due to lung cancer has risen every year. Last year, 390,000 United States residents died from smoking-related illnesses.

"People take a long time to get a scare. It takes time for people to smarten up," says Frank Cimmino, 51, of Cape Coral, Fla. "Americans habitually have to be painted into a corner before they respond."

Smoking has become more of a commodity. That's made people more territorial about the 5 to 10 feet of turf that surrounds them.

In the 19th century, writer Oliver Wendell Holmes put it this way:

"Tobacco is a filthy weed that from the devil does proceed. It drains your purse, it burns your clothes, and makes a chimney of your nose."

Health and Human Services says smoking costs the United States \$ 52 billion each year in increased health care expenses, higher insurance rates and lost productivity. It costs motel and hotel owners an extra \$ 1,500 per room every year, just to replace the bedspreads and other things damaged by cigarettes, says Charlie Stiles, chairman of the public issues committee for Florida's chapter of the American Cancer Society.

Some businesses, like Turner Broadcasting System in Atlanta (WTBS, CNN) won't even hire smokers.

Everywhere, it's getting harder to indulge in a Kool or Camel at work.

"And if they can't smoke in the work place, they're more likely to quit. That's what's happening," Rozar says.

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In addition, cigarettes constantly rise in cost. And that, too, helps push people to stop smoking.

History backs that up. One of the biggest drops in cigarette smoking came in 1983, when the federal excise tax on cigarettes doubled. Over the past few years, many states have continued to raise cigarette taxes to help them balance their budgets. It used to be smokers could dump two or three quarters into a machine for a pack. Today, most machines charge \$ 2.

The country's median age continues to rise. That means, frankly, that an ever-growing part of the population is closer to old age and death. Because of that, there is a greater reverence for life today, Stiles says. That's why people are taking charge of what they're putting into their bodies. They have learned they have control over their longevity.

No changes would have gained momentum had it not been for that white-bearded, white-uniformed owl-like Surgeon General, C. Everett Koop.

Reagan's head medicine man tried to snuff out smoking as no other government official has ever done. He likened tobacco to heroin. He released report after report, the most eyebrow-raising of those being his study that said smoke from smokers also can kill people sitting next to them at the movies or at McDonald's.

It gave non-smokers the equivalent of a heavy-duty fire extinguisher. Many took the news to their unions and demanded a smoke-free workplace, says Stock, of the Smoking Policy Institute.

'It gave them (non-smokers) the courage to take a position,' she says. 'It's something that everybody knew, but this gave them something to refer to.'

Now that the federal government has taken on the omnipotent tobacco industry, it's given others the courage to follow suit. Using a 25-cent-a-pack tax on cigarettes to pay for it, California just started a series of advertisements that accuse cigarette makers of "exploitation of minorities, seduction of the young and the selling of suicide."

Tobacco companies also are getting sued. One high-profile case involved Rose D. Cipollone, who died from cancer after smoking more than a pack of cigarettes every day for 43 years. Her husband sued and won a hefty sum from three tobacco companies, which, he said, were responsible for his wife's death because it sold a product that it knew was deadly. Health experts say cases like this have given tobacco giants a tarred image.

And, unlike what the National Rifle Association has managed to do with gun legislation, the tobacco lobby hasn't been able to sway Congress' opinion about easing the smoking laws. The reason for that, Stock says, is because Americans have taken the smoking issue into their own hands at a grassroots level. Most of the laws have passed at city hall and the state capital - places closer, more accessible to the people.

Ray Crampton, the gentleman who was accosted in the Atlanta airport, says we need a cause to rally behind - something they don't have right now. There's no Vietnam war. The Evil Empire has turned into a pussycat. Our standard of

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living, he says, is comfortable. Why not make fire-breathing smokers the new monster?

(Ad Hudler writes for the Fort Myers News-Press)

SUBJECT: SMOKING

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